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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses social and emotional development during childhood and adolescence in the United States, focusing on factors that affect children's prosocial behavior and the role of parents in promoting such behavior. It is argued that changing family structures, including the growth of single parent families and "latch-key" children, along with increasing youth violence and antisocial electronic media, all contribute to the development of antisocial behavior in children. Parents can promote prosocial behavior in early childhood by modeling prosocial behavior, reinforcing prosocial behavior, and providing direct behavioral instruction. During middle childhood, peer rejection, neglect, and loneliness can contribute to antisocial behavior. During adolescence, peer pressure, conformity, social acceptance, and rejection all contribute to social and emotional development. Parents need to maintain a proper perspective, accept outrageous but harmless behavior, and intervene in the case of potentially harmful or dangerous behavior. Overall, parents and other influential adults should focus their energies on understanding children's development, developing prevention strategies during the early childhood years, reinforcing those strategies during middle childhood and adolescence, and being persistent and consistent within the family, school, and community. (Contains 14 references.) (MDM)

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International Forum on Youth '96

Theme: "SOCIETAL AND FAMILY SITUATIONS IN THE U.S.A. THAT AFFECT CHILDREN'S PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIOR"

October 17, 1996 - Gifu, Japan

Sponsored by the National Assembly for Youth Development, Tokyo

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The focus of this paper is on societal and family situations in the USA that affect children's prosocial behavior - that is, behavior that shows concern for the welfare of others, and includes helping, caring, sharing, giving, cooperating, sympathizing, empathizing, rescuing, defending, protecting and comforting. Social and emotional development factors during childhood and adolescence are presented with regard to age group and prosocial behavior. Practical application suggestions are provided to help guide the role of parents and other attending adults in nurturing the prosocial development process.

The present situation of youth and sociability and relevant problems in the USA.

America is a vastly changing society, and there are a number of trends in the USA that are having a negative effect on children and their socialization process. The following three interrelated trends appear to be at the heart of children's socialization problems and inhibit the development of prosocial behavior:

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1. <u>The Changing Family Structure</u> -

Some Statistics & Implications:

* Divorce & unwed mothers - 18 million children in single parent homes
* Fatherless - 1/3 of families do not have a father at home
* Increase in dual working parents
* Less time to meet children's needs, and monitor their activities. Thus, less guidance and prosocial influence. "Latch-key" children are confined to the home, which means isolation from friends and the trials and errors of learning during social play; and, greater access to antisocial program content on TV and related home media.
* Fewer prosocial parent role model opportunities. Father absence creates a void of needed consistent positive male guidance especially for boys. Father absence is also a predictor of impaired academic achievement, school misbehavior, suicide, violence, and criminal behavior.
* Increased parent stress increases the conflict between parent and child. This reduces the likelihood of a positive social parental model and a positive influencing relationship.
* Parents receive no formal training on how to parent or education regarding children's development.

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2. Youth Violence -

Some Statistics & Implications:

* Violence is up 57% over the last decade. Once only considered a city problem, now in suburbs and rural areas.

* Juveniles commit between 2,000 & 3,000 homicides a year (14% by those under 14 years of age).

* Over 6,000 school-age children die from homicide or suicide each year (lose about a classroom of children every 2.5 days to violent death).

* 1 in 8 youth has brought a weapon to Junior and Senior High School. 50 teens a year die of school related violence.

* Children of this generation are growing up with an increasing fear of violence and harm.

* 1 in 9 children don't come to school because of fear of violence; not just afraid of weapons, but also of bullying, taunting, beatings, and drug use intimidation.

* 71% of 7-10 year olds fear they might be shot or stabbed at school or at home.

* An increasing number of children are developing "school phobia".

* And, there is plenty of violence at the hands of parents : 2,000 children die from abuse and neglect each year; 5 children die at the hands of abusive parents each day; also, 18,000 children are permanently disabled and 142,000 are seriously injured.

* Abusive parents produce abusive children, and the abuse cycle just continues. Aggression breeding aggression.

3. Antisocial Electronic Media -

Some Statistics & Implications:

* Children between 2 and 11 years of age watch an average of 28 hours of TV weekly.

* By the end of elementary school the average child will have seen about 100,000 acts of violence.

* There is a positive correlation between the amount of TV viewed and the incidence of conflict with parents, fighting, and delinquency.

* How many hours are also spent witnessing violence in front of videos, movies, computers?

* Increased TV/video viewing and computer on-line time creates another antisocial problem; it increases social isolation.

* Electronics also serves as a "baby-sitter" for working parents, as an escape from peer rejection, bullying and loneliness, as an alternative to real social play, and as a format for learning antisocial behavior.

* "Virtual Violence" on the electronic media in the USA seems inescapable. It is not just on TV, but also on movie and computers screens, and in music and cyberspace.

* A question to ask ourselves: "Does TV portray life and society's values and morals, or does TV set the standard from which a society models?"

* Negative social models are seen more frequently on TV and movies; for example, the

parent's role in now often projected as subordinate to children, where children are seen as being abusive, dominating, and antisocial to parents, as well as to other adults and children.

* Girls are emulating aggression seen in TV heroines. New findings suggest girls get desensitized to violence just like boys, and when heroines' aggressive acts are portrayed positively, girls conclude it's a good way to solve problems.

* Aggressive, antisocial music lyrics also degrade and refute social values and morales.

* Another question: "Are parents accepting violence and antisocial behavior as the cultural norm, thereby condoning, rather then challenging, antisocial behavior exhibited by our children?" (Statistics from the preceding collected from an assortment of media resources)

To deal with antisocial behavior in children it is important to understand the nature of children's social and emotional development so one can guide them toward prosocial behavior. The following is a brief discussion on the development of socialized behavior in the early childhood, middle childhood and adolescent years, and the role of parents and other attending adults in the socialization process.

The Development of Socialized Behavior in Early Childhood (ages 0-6)

Social and Emotional Competence and the Role of Parents/Adults

Promoting prosocial behavior in children during the early childhood years is not simple. In general, social and emotional competence emerge from secure attachment relationships, authoritative parenting, and extended exposure to peers. *Socially competent children* leave the preschool years prepared to cope with the risks and opportunities in the family, in school, and with their peers. *Socially incompetent children*, on the other hand, are typically rejected or neglected by peers, have difficulty making friends, are in frequent conflict with peers, are frequent perpetrators or victims of aggression, and either dominate or are dominated by peers (Krantz, 1994). Above all, these children face an unpredictable future, entering middle childhood with social and emotional deficits that may prove impossible to overcome. Therefore, how children develop socially and emotionally by age 5 or 6 will set the stage for later years.

Parents influence the development of social competence by the quality of the interpersonal relationships they establish with their children. These influences take two forms: 1.) the quality of the attachment, and, 2.) the family's approach to the child's socialization and discipline.

With regard to *quality of the attachment*, it has long been known that secure attachment to the mother during the infant-toddler period is associated with the child's development of social skills in the early preschool years and the quality of interactions between friends.

With regard to the *family approach to children's socialization and discipline* parenting style can make all the difference in children's social competence. Research shows that if children are securely attached to their parents and have been socialized in an "authoritative parenting style" - that is, where rules are firmly enforced but the children are given some say in what the rules are - they are likely to be socially competent in early childhood (Krantz, 1994). For example, children of

authoritative parents tend to collaborate with others to achieve goals, are more likely to share, and are sympathetic when other children need help.

Also, authoritative style adults teach prosocial values. This can be done through "modeling", "reinforcing", and "direct instruction":

* Modeling Prosocial Behavior Should Be Everyday Adult Behavior

Hearing about prosocial behavior is effective, but seeing it in action makes the lesson more vivid. Youngsters who frequently observe people cooperating, helping, sharing, and giving are most likely to act in those ways themselves. Thus, adults who model such actions, either with other adults or with children, help to increase children's prosocial behavior (Grusec and Arnason, 1982). ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS! Hence, adults who urge children to lend a hand to others, but seldom offer assistance themselves show children that helping is not really a top priority (Kostelnik, et al, 1988).

* Reinforce Prosocial behavior

This is just a matter of observation on the adult's part. But, adults commonly fail to make the most of this simple strategy for one of two reasons. First, they may take children's prosocial behaviors for granted and not reward them adequately or often enough. Second, adults may inadvertently reward actions that actually counteract helpful or cooperative behavior (Kostelnick, et al, 1988).

* Provide Direct Instruction

Children's prosocial behavior also increases when they have been systematically been taught to think and act prosocially. Such instruction focuses on the individual skills that lead to helping and cooperating. Recognizing prosocial behavior when it is displayed, identifying the needs of others, anticipating the consequences of acts, and generating multiple solutions to interpersonal problems are all prosocial skills (Kostelnic, et al, 1988). The following are some strategies that adults can start to use during the early childhood years and are applicable in later years:

1. Discuss the value of prosocial behavior and give examples of how children themselves can act prosocially.
2. Tell stories that illustrate prosocial principles.
3. Demonstrate prosocial behavior using small figures, dolls, puppets, televised vignettes, or live models.
4. Get children to reenact previously observed prosocial behavior/actions.
5. Have children role-play situations in which they take on the behaviors of helper or of those being helped.
6. Teach children games that promote cooperation and awareness of others.
7. Create opportunities for children to help or cooperate in real-life situations.

The Development of Socialized Behavior in Middle Childhood (ages 7-12)

Cognitive and Social Skills and the Role of Parents/Adults

Moving from early childhood to middle childhood we start finding important advances in children's cognitive and emotional abilities which significantly increase their tendency to behave prosocially.

Cognitivly, the decline in egocentricity from early to middle childhood improves children's ability to perceive when others are in need, when they are in distress, and when they are likely to cooperate. More importantant, children show significant improvements in "prosocial moral reasoning"; that is, the ability to think about conflicts in which they must choose between satisfying their own needs or those of other persons (Eisenberg, Lennon, & Roth, 1983).

Emotionally, advances in development can also be expected to affect the development of prosocial behavior from early to middle childhood. Children, like adults, are more likely to help, care about, and share with others when they identify with their emotional state. This is done through "empathizing" and "sympathizing". However, we must be patient since children's empathy does not begin to result in prosocial behavior until late in the elementary school years, at about age eleven (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987).

If a parent would like to take advantage of these developmental changes and have a more lasting influence on their child's prosocial development, the use of real life dilemmas to evaluate children's prosocial moral reasoning should be considered. Fortunately, family life provides an endless sequence of moral dilemmas. This offers opportunities for parents, as well as teachers, to promote children's empathy and sympathy by focusing on emotional outcomes associated with alternative interaction scenarios.

Rejected, Neglected, and Lonely Children and the Role of Parents/Adults

Peer rejection puts children at prosocial development risk during the middle childhood years. Compared to more popular children, rejected children interact more negatively with their classmates, do less well academically, and are perceived by their teachers as more deviant and depressed (Vosk, et al, 1982). When they try to enter groups of children to play, they tend to be disruptive and are frequently rebuffed or ignored (Putallaz & Wasserman, 1989). Many children who wish they had more friends try to gain attention through bullying if they can't get it in friendly ways. Sometimes hitting or taunting another child is the only way to make contact or communicate. Unfortunately, children do not appear to grow out of their experience of rejection. There is accumulating evidence that rejected children are at risk for adjustment problems later in life, such as juvenile delinquency, criminality, marital dysfunction, and mental illness (Roff, 1961; Roff, 1990).

Neglected children follow a similar fate as rejected children. Neglected children have little or no positive interaction with same-age peers. Their limited social experiences teach them to retreat, withdraw, and isolate themselves, or to offend, disrupt, tease and hurt their peers - further decreasing the likelihood that their peers will accept them (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Loneliness must also be considered here. Children who are lonely are usually submissive, have been rejected and are frequently victimized and bullied by their peers (Rubin, Lewmare & Lollis, 1990). They also tend to blame themselves for their social failures. Over time these children's chronic feelings of loneliness and depression may cause them to withdraw altogether from peer interaction and take refuge in "electronic friends". Children who are rejected by most of their peers could avoid feelings of loneliness by having just one mutual friend. Thus, parents may substantially reduce their child's vulnerability to serious long-term effects of rejection by promoting one positive relationship.

The Development of Socialized Behavior in Adolescence(ages 13-18)

Adolescents is and always has been a time of storm and stress. Risk and opportunity hang in the balance as teenagers search, experiment, explore, and sometimes blunder their way through their daily lives, trying to cope with a host of extraordinary difficult problems. Several of these problems - peer influence, peer pressure and conformity, and social acceptance and rejection - will be briefly discussed.

The Increasing Influence of Peers and the Role of Parents/Adults

One of the most distinctive aspects of adolescence is the increasing importance of peers. Adolescents become highly dependent upon one another for self-esteem, companionship, and intimacy (Buhrmester). As teenagers become more involved with peers, they become less emotionally attached to their families, and disclose less and less intimate information to their parents (Burmester & Furman, 1987). This trend, unfortunately for parents, sharply reduces the family's opportunities to promote adult values and family traditions with their teenagers.

Peer Pressure and Conformity and the Role of Parents/Adults

Parents will probably be increasingly challenged, offended, and intimidated by their teenagers' imitation of their peers and will usually argue with them over hairstyles, clothing, use of profanity, and taste in music, leaving little room for more positive interaction. The level of conflict often escalates over time, as both sides become increasingly rigid in their positions and more and more dedicated to winning the argument. If left unchecked, these conflicts can eventually undermine the quality of their relationship and significantly reduce parents' influence in their children's lives (Krantz, 1994). The following recommendations may be helpful to parents:

* A parent should maintain the proper perspective. The teenager's outrageous behavior is probably no worse than many of the things the parent did when he or she was that age. The teen is simply declaring his identity as the parent once did. The parent grew out of his or her outrageous behavior, and the teen is likely to do the same.
* If the teenager's conforming behavior is outrageous, but essentially harmless, show a moderate amount of outrage (just enough to prove you are a parent!) but avoid nagging and persistent attempts to change his behavior. Nagging is likely to make matters worse, and

prohibiting the behavior will encourage him to engage in the behavior covertly, far from parent view and influence.

* If a teenagers's conforming behavior is potentially harmful or dangerous, there must be intervention. Grounding and tightening curfews may be effective, but don't overestimate parent ability to coerce change. If the parent has avoided nagging and pestering the teenager on minor issues (such as hairstyle or clothes) in the past, the teen is much more likely to take the parent seriously on more important issues (such as drugs, drinking and sexual activity). If the parent has managed to maintain a positive relationship with the teenager based on mutual love and respect, the parent may actually effect some change in the teen's behavior - but it will take time and persistence.

Social Acceptance and Rejection and the Role of Parents/Adults

Compared to children's experience in elementary school, the complexity and diversity of interactions with peers in junior high and high school significantly increases the opportunities for social acceptance and the risks of peer rejection. Rejected teens are less socially and academically skilled, less self-controlled, and more likely to show impulsive, aggressive, and disruptive behaviors. Social rejection in adolescence is a pervasive problem that is often associated with other serious adjustment problems, such as delinquency, eating disorders, suicide, and alcohol and drug abuse (Frentz, et al, 1991).

Although the causes of peer rejection in adolescence are reasonably well understood, improving a teenager's peer acceptance is a formidable task. The following recommendations may prove helpful to parents, other daily contact adults, and professionals who are in a position to intervene:

* Keep in mind that rejected teenagers are not all rejected for the same reason: Some are overly aggressive, others are passive and withdrawn, and still others show attention deficits and hyperactivity. Parents should gear their intervention to the specific behaviors, attitudes, and thinking that have led to rejection for the teenager.

* Recognize that, by adolescence, rejection has become a way of life for so many teenagers, so it will be highly resistant to change. Parents, teachers, and therapists will need to coordinate their efforts over extended periods of time.

* Teenagers - unlike younger children- are probably not rejected simply for inappropriate or annoying behaviors. Rejection is more likely due to complex combinations of social skill deficits, social cognition deficits, and underlying emotional problems that have developed over a number of years.

The bottom line: Parents and other influential adults must focus primary energies on 1.) understanding children's development, 2.) developing prevention strategies during the early childhood years, 3.) reinforcing those strategies during middle childhood and adolescents, and 4.) being persistent and consistent within the family, school, and community systems.

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